

Joseph Nechvatal

by

Jay Murphy



Joseph Nechvatal's new "computer virus" paintings flicker, burn, radiate, disappear. They are the fruits of his two and a half years as the Louis Pasteur artist-in-residency at Arbois, working at the seventeenth century salt warehouses of Saline Royale. Nechvatal was provided an enormous atelier, an apartment in the Musee d'Arbois, and became the first artist to use the new technology studio at the Saline Royale. This computer lab, set up at the Claude-Nicolas Ledoux Foundation's International Center for Reflection on the Future, allowed Nechvatal to carry out an extensive type of retrospective - or a "contamination" of his own previous artistic

production by loading his entire oeuvre onto an Apple FXII computer, and then randomly infecting it with computer viruses in collaboration with Jean-Philippe Massonie, chief faculty of the computer science department at the University of Franche Comte (MIS Laboratories). These paintings were triggered by Nechvatal's residence in Arbois, the hometown of Louis Pasteur, who carried out crucial research into viruses. The Pasteur Institute, founded in 1888, now pursues its historic mission to battle virulent and contagious diseases through its present-day role researching AIDS. Another background influence was Arbois' history as the proposed site for Chaux, the utopian city planned by Louis XIV's architect Claude-Nicolas Ledoux for the salt-mine workers of the Franche Comte; one end-mark to industrial utopia.

These variously scaled works (from 1.5 x 2.1 meters to 6 x 6 meters) are a logical development from his earlier computer-robot assisted acrylic-on-canvas paintings that exploited the visual art potential of computers in manufacturing paintings of scanned, overlaid images in a truly hands-off, post-industrial manner. Much of the art of the 1980s, in Nechvatal's eyes, suffered from repeating the pop irony of Andy Warhol and his own industrial revolution within painting, resulting in a servile and politically conservative replication of what Jean Baudrillard had billed as the "simulation society". Nechvatal's intent was to push the post-modern cycles of image reproduction and media pollution even further, in a truly *fin-de-siecle* and mannerist fashion, to achieve a new "post-industrial sacrificial sublime".

The "computer virus project" paintings tend to even more highly charge the issues already present in the artist's computer-robotic assisted paintings, first begun in 1986. The subjects of mass-media standardization and the domination of corporate capitalist social paradigms were supplemented by a strategy of excess, strongly inspired by the vision of

transgression and atheist spirituality spelled out in the oeuvre of dissident surrealist Georges Bataille. The next consequence of this was the work through computerization; a tool associated with the new digitized "post-modern" social order of the 1980s and 90s, a cybernetic replacement for the model of the factory as the principle underlying social life. Nechvatal's "overload into overmind" strategy sought to challenge the cold efficacy of computer logic and its potential for a rational and pragmatic ordering of social life from within by using computer imaging to produce such a surfeit of near-indecipherable imagery that the sensory input would necessarily lead to a restructuring of perception, and an ensuing gestalt that calls into question the media code itself with its multiple, often overwhelming concomitant associations.

That these spurious and pseudo-rational overdeterminations are themselves humanly created, and can be collapsed, overturned, or changed at will, is emphasized even more strongly in the "computer virus project," as is the spirituality immanent in Nechvatal's art.

Nechvatal forces the viewer to reconstruct the process of image-formation, latching on for support to a detail here or there, in a plane where figure/ground relationships are interchangeable - as if a post-postmodern Jackson Pollock had commandeered the most advanced computer laboratories. This visual relationship is only heightened with the introduction of the often startling computer viruses, which in Nechvatal's first series of experiments served only to distort the image, as in "viral attaque: nOt fade away" while in the second series, with works like "viral attaque: amoR foRti", the virus marks surround and slowly eat away the larger composite image.

If the reference to AIDS is ever-present, or explicit in works like "viral attaque: transmissioN", or "viral attaque: cOnquest Of the hOrrible", so is

the inference that AIDS, too, has a human origin. The AIDS phenomenon serves to underline the nature of subjectivity and self. As Nechvatal writes: "The body is not one self but a fiction of a self-built from a mass of interacting selves. " AIDS becomes a metaphor for the permeability of the body politic - the possibility of bold and ecstatic freedom as well as tragedy.

Behind the "computer virus project" work is human resilience, a note of sanguine possibility, the hope that humanity can work through constrictions and arbitrary repressions into a heightened awareness. There is more than a touch here of that longing for what the Mahanirvana Tantra termed the "Unbounded Consciousness". Nechvatal's computer-induced delirium does not only seek to enter intoxication or excess - the better to step out of it into efficacious action against deadening social controls in the manner of the dadaists or surrealists. It also aspires to what the Indian Vedanta described as the "highest state" - where the seer, the seen, and the process of seeing are revealed as a undivided, unified One. Nechvatal's "computer virus project" works have to be placed in the ancient lineage of art that encourages the ego to be strong enough to die.

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